WHAT’S NOT TO LOVE ABOUT JESUS?

February 3, 2019

Luke 4:14-30

During this time of year, we all have the opportunity to listen to our public leaders as they offer their addresses on the State of the City, the State of the State, and the State of the Union and share with us their vision, priorities, hopes, and dreams for this coming year. Jesus joins in this endeavor in our gospel lesson for today as he stands up in the synagogue and delivers his State of the Town and Country address by reading from the prophet Isaiah and offering to the people of his hometown of Nazareth his vision and priorities for the beloved community that he has come to introduce and inaugurate among the people of Galilee.

“The Spirit of God is upon me,” Jesus read, “and has anointed me to bring good news to those who are impoverished, to proclaim release to the captives, to restore the sight of those who are blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of God’s favor when all debts would be cancelled, all slaves would be allowed to go free, and the people who had lost their land to the wealthy landowners during the past 50 years could reclaim their property so that everyone would have enough food to eat from their own land.”

This reading was truly good news to the people because the majority of the people in Nazareth and all of Galilee were predominantly poor, were subjects of a few wealthy landowners, were beholden to the demands of their religious institution, and were under the oppressive rule of the Romans—those Gentile foreigners who had occupied their land and had burdened them with another tax besides the taxes that they already were paying to their own religious leaders in order to support their luxurious lifestyle. Then, when Jesus sat down and said to the people, “Today this scripture already has been fulfilled in your hearing,” you can imagine how ecstatic the people must have been. As we are told, “Everyone spoke well of Jesus, and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.”

However, in order to demonstrate that this beloved community that Jesus was commissioned to establish was meant to be an inclusive community, Jesus reminded the people that when Elijah was on the run and was starving as the result of a famine, God sent Elijah to a lowly foreign widow in order to secure some food and rest for a while. Jesus also reminded the people that Naaman of Syria, another foreigner and rival military commander, was a leper that God chose to cure without doing the same for many lepers in Israel. The point that Jesus was trying to make obviously struck a negative chord with the people of Nazareth, because they became filled with rage, drove Jesus out of town, and attempted to kill him by throwing him over a cliff before Jesus mysteriously disappeared from their midst.

Why this sudden change in attitude about Jesus from one of admiration and praise to one of distain and condemnation? Didn’t Jesus’ gracious words about God liberating the people from their bondage mean anything to them? Why couldn’t this liberation also include other foreigners beyond these people who understood themselves to be the chosen people of God? Even for those who were impoverished in Nazareth and Galilee, this perception that they were the chosen people of God was core to their self-identity and created a sense among these citizens that they were the ones who were solely worthy of God’s exclusive benefits that were described by Jesus in his reading from Isaiah.

In reality, the Greeks and the Romans had been infiltrating and settling in the land of Galilee for centuries. The people of the neighboring countries of Phoenicia, Syria, and Samaria also were constantly pressing against the Galilean borders. Before too long, the people of Galilee feared that they would be overrun by these foreigners, people whom they resented and despised not only because they were oppressed by them, but also because they did not worship the one true God. So when Jesus suggested with these two examples that God’s beloved community also would include all of these foreigners, you can imagine how all of the natural citizens of Nazareth and Galilee—rich and poor alike—would feel threatened and want to get rid of this hometown boy who obviously could not be their messiah and liberator.

For Jesus, establishing an inclusive community grounded in the love and justice of God seems to be his primary vision and focus. As we hear today, Jesus’ mission involves the liberation and freedom of all people, all of which presumed a community in which no one was impoverished, no one was captive to an inequitable economic system, no one was blind to the truth, no one was oppressed by another, no one was enslaved to another, no one was held in bondage to indebtedness, and everyone had their own piece of property on which to grow their own food for sustenance. Granted, none of this was going to become a reality very easily so long as Galilee was under the control of the Romans, but that didn’t mean that the internal systems controlled by the wealthy landowners and the religious authorities couldn’t be transformed to be more consistent with Jesus’ vision of the beloved community that he was chosen and felt called to embody.

Here in the United States, we have a history that somewhat parallels the experience of the people of Galilee. For example, earlier in our history, we also were dominated and controlled by a foreign imperial power known as England. In fact, the religious people who established the early colonies often characterized King George as the pharaoh from whom they made their escape across the Atlantic Ocean, which often was dubbed the Red Sea. This new-found land often was compared to the promised land of the Hebrew Scriptures. When these early settlers, most of whom were white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant men, won what was known as the Revolutionary War, this victory confirmed for them that they were the chosen people of God who now had the right to establish themselves in this land as they would so choose. This perspective strongly influenced how these people related with and treated the indigenous people of this land, the people who had been brought over from Africa to work our land and handle all of our household chores, and the Catholic, Jewish, and secular humanist immigrants who were flocking to this country in the early 20th century.

Not to be forgotten, women still did not have the right to vote until 1920 because women were supposed to be subservient to men according to the Bible. World War I and World War II were opportunities to use the cross of Christ as proof that God was on our side against the evil powers of Germany and Japan. After World War II, Communists were hunted down and imprisoned as enemies not only of the state, but also of our Christian religion. I know because that is the environment in which I grew up. More recently, many Christian churches were unwilling to welcome gay and lesbian persons into their communities. And today, many citizens of faith, rich and poor alike, are still objecting to the entry of immigrants into this country, most of whom are considered foreigners who are coming from Central and South America—not to forget that many of them are our sisters and brothers in Christ.

Jesus makes it very clear in his first recorded sermon that his vision for God’s reign on earth is going to involve everyone who currently is living in Galilee, not just those who align themselves with thinking that they are the chosen people of God. For example, when Jesus taught his disciples to pray, “Thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven,” he meant for his followers to make their mission on this earth the same as his own in terms of establishing an inclusive beloved community in which those who were impoverished—no matter their country of origin—would have to live in poverty no more, those who were incarcerated unjustly—no matter the color of their skin—would be released, those who were blind to the truth—no matter their economic status—would have their vision expanded, those who were oppressed by others—be they men, women, or children—would be set free, those who were enslaved—be they citizens or not—would be liberated, those who were mired down in debt would be given debt relief, and those who were homeless would be returned to their previous homes where they could cook their own meals and sleep in their own bed.

As disciples of this Jesus of Nazareth, we are chosen, called, and commissioned to adopt Jesus’ vision above all else, to pursue his mission, and to follow in his way of love for all people—citizens, foreigners, and strangers alike. For a variety of reasons, we also could become enraged by this vision and these values, but they are Jesus’ vision and values that benefit each and every one of us and all people because God’s love never ends and because Jesus has made a promise that God’s justice and peace already has been made complete. As we live with hope into this promise, may the love and peace of God that goes beyond all of our human understanding, keep our hearts and our minds ever faithful unto Jesus, our Liberator and our Savior. Amen.